

IN MEMORIAM



## IVO BANAC (1947-2020): *FIDES, RATIO, LIBERTAS*

The death of Professor Ivo Banac leaves a huge void that will be very difficult to fill. Without the slightest doubt, we can conclude that the Great Bard of Croatian historiography is dead. It can already be said that Professor Banac marked a significant period in Croatian public life, where he was present for more than three decades. The extent to which Banac contributed by his work to building the foundations of modern Croatian democracy will be judged by future generations, but greatness grows with the perspective afforded by time. It is equally certain that Ivo Banac was a significant restorer of Croatian society after half a century of communist dictatorship. There is no doubt that he enriched his Croatia, which had been impoverished and ravaged by totalitarian narrow-mindedness, and did everything he could to have it breathe deeply the air of freedom over the last thirty years. All that time, until the very end of his life, he defended the democratic order, aware of what the alternative offered. He warned our generation that we should not take things for granted and that we were not sufficiently cognizant of the facts about the nature of the dictatorships and historical radicalisms of the last century. More generally, he repeatedly instilled in me a certain dose of optimism that our 21st century will avoid the horrors of war and revolution. In this sense, he regarded the democratic order as a guarantee of peace and prosperity, faced with the challenges posed by an uncertain future.



No small credit is due to Professor Banac for why we think and speak more freely today than they did three decades ago, although we are not as yet sufficiently aware of it. He truly fulfilled the mission of a public intellectual by permanently pushing outwards the boundaries of freedom in the public square of a still unfree transition country. However, Banac well understood that there is no freedom without truth, and vice versa. He did not follow the fashionable currents of postmodern relativism that overwhelm us on all sides, but rather he adhered to the old classical school of historiography. His ardent

love for truth and freedom drove entirely all his public and scholarly work and was most strongly manifested in the polemics of public debate. He was deeply rooted in that medieval Universitas which believed that the academy and its members were called to be humble seekers after the truth about creation and the Creator. Up to the end, he strove to maintain, at all costs, high moral and intellectual standards in the deep crisis of today's university. In search of this, Banac was a true defender of all those achievements on which Western civilization was built, whose spirit grew out of the three great cities that are its symbols - Jerusalem, Athens and Rome.

He did not act as an ordinary academic bureaucrat, like so many others one could meet, but as a true intellectual who understood the importance of public action. In addition, his approach to students exuded humanity, warmth, and nobility, far from any arrogance of mind or the cold distance of academic bureaucracy. He attracted young people, he went to meet them, he gathered them round him and he encouraged them with the fullness of his great knowledge and charm. Ivo Banac was the model of a man who has a position and an opinion, of whom there are fewer and fewer nowadays. He had a strong personality. By no means soft, always unequivocal, determined and clear in his public appearances, because of that he managed to build up his strong and recognizable public position.

It is simply not possible to love the world, if one does not first love one's own country. Banac's patriotism and his cosmopolitanism were thus mirror images. Until the last moment of his life, he was preoccupied with caring for his Croatia and the world. He followed world events and world politics every day. Croatia will certainly not have such an expert on world events after his departure. I was entranced that he read the American and European press every day and wondered where he got so much time to follow all these things with many other commitments.

He did not love Croatia and the Croatian people with ostentatious and big words, fierce fanaticism and thunderous pounding of the chest, but prudently, quietly and unobtrusively, without any exaggeration. The very fact that his last wish was to be buried in the shade of Dubrovnik's cypresses, next to the graves of his ancestors, also shows the immense love he had for the land of his birth. Ivo Banac would never have achieved such a successful American career and entry into the world of American university life, had he not been nourished by the fruitful intellectual and cultural heritage of his Dubrovnik and his Croatia.

Professor Banac also experienced the traditional Croatian envy, our spitefulness and our misery as have so many great people in our country. Such impulses have been further strengthened in a society that has just emerged from a system based precisely on envy, which is a mortal sin and an anti-vir-

tue. Banac fought against such a mentality all the time, personally witnessing to that in our meetings and gatherings, when he rejoiced in other people's successes, when he showed all his generosity and that gentlemanly spirit which adorned him immensely. Likewise, in a society where a culture of idleness is not uncommon, he bore witness with his example of perseverance and hard work. I had the opportunity in person to observe what his working day looked like, he did not waste a minute, from day to day he was creative, reading and writing his texts, spending himself and burning himself out to the very end of his life, always subject to strict discipline and constantly dedicated to work. He wrote his last review less than a fortnight ago, despite the great pain he was suffering. His sacrifice was hidden and self-effacing. Thus, as a privileged member of Banac's school, I had the opportunity clearly to realize from his shining example that without great sacrifice there are neither great deeds nor great people.

If today's Croatia had adopted at least a little of his work habits, it would be a much better place in which to live and to create. He did not miss opportunities, efficient and meticulous, a man of small things and incredible care for details, accurate and precise in arrangements and communications, he never postponed work or procrastinated with the obligations before him, no matter how difficult and unpleasant they were. Such behaviour was not so much a matter of his high professionalism as of his selflessness and sacrifice, to be always available to all, which reflected his selfless love for his neighbour. In recent years, he invested extraordinary efforts, read copious literature and worked in the archives, all in order to write a fundamental work on the Croatian Spring on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the collapse of the Croatian leadership in Karadjordjevo. Unfortunately, it remained unfinished, in segments, as he confided to me before his death.

Ivo Banac was not only my colleague, but also my friend. I had the opportunity to touch the deepest places of his soul. We were united by a passion for history and for debates about politics and various topics from the fields of literature and philosophy. We were also bound by our southern origins, of which we were both very proud, and which helped us to understand each other even better in our encounters. It appeared that he was only focused on various intellectual and political topics as evidenced by his public contributions. However, he was also a man of faith, in the deepest depths of his being a Christian soul. His earthly life carried within itself two non-transient categories - reason and faith, from which arose on the one hand his accentuated intellectualism and on the other, his self-denying spirituality. Banac thus lived his humanity to the full as a man curious of knowledge, but no less a man who seeks eternal things.

It seems that what a man gets in his earliest childhood, he carries with him his whole life, no matter how much he sometimes deviates from that path. Until the last breath of his life, he carried in his heart the light of faith which he received in the warmth of his family, in the first steps of life, and which he spiritually and intellectually strengthened by his education with the Jesuit Fathers in New York. He never left that fundamental line, and even if he was weighed down by the burden of life, he returned to refresh his soul at the sources of his childhood's faith. This was also influenced by the Dubrovnik region, from where its miraculous history originated. This area of strong religious traditions and the famous Republic of Dubrovnik has shaped an unusual combination of entrepreneurial spirit and Christian morality. Although the ancient people of Dubrovnik maintained ties with various civilizations and cultures of their hinterland, they never lost the strong stamp of their affiliation with the West and Catholicism. Banac also adopted that openness and breadth of spirit of his ancestors, having a great knowledge of Islam and Orthodoxy that I had the honour to appreciate at first-hand, but at the same time he never lost his original connection to the old Dubrovnik heritage.

Banac's liberalism remained somewhat incomprehensible in a country of continental tradition inspired by the French approach. His liberalism was not one with roots in the French Revolution, it was not determined by progress. It was not hostile to religion and tradition, nor did it have socialist and collectivist ambitions as did the revolutionary liberalism that strongly influenced Croatian politics and culture. It was based on his experience of Anglo-American liberalism. It had a classical and, above all, a conservative outline, because it originated in countries that did not make such a radical break with the past as in the French scenario. Hence his respect for the faith and moral tradition of Christian civilization. Moreover, as such, Banac's liberalism advocated a greater role for the individual, greater economic freedom, less state intervention, and greater freedom and association of free people, with the ultimate goal of creating an independent civil society freed from too much influence by government and the state apparatus.

I fear that his liberal ideas have had the least influence in this area, if we look at the current state of Croatian society. It would be quite wrong to claim that his commitment to liberalism came only from the American phase of his life. We should not forget the Dubrovnik tradition of freedom, which had continuity with the idea of *Libertas* from the period of medieval Christianity. Banac's preoccupation with the Dubrovnik version of traditional liberalism was best felt in perhaps his best essay, *The Conservative Utopia of the Vojnović brothers*, in 1981. It clearly shows how he emphasized the closeness of the Dubrovnik and Anglo-American experiences. Although this is not men-

tioned explicitly in the text itself, the allusions by a domestic author living in America, who opened such “reactionary” topics in the grey era of socialism, are more than clear.

Banac contrasted the Dubrovnik and French conceptions of freedom, which had a revolutionary and utopian starting point at the time of the fall of the Dubrovnik Republic. Contrary to the French, the people of Dubrovnik believed that only through tradition and the leadership of the elite could be preserved real freedoms. He used this opinion to push his personal worldview, according to which freedom is above equality, through the attitudes of the Vojnović brothers and the Dubrovnik authorities, thus suggesting, between the lines, that socialism at the time was also the enemy of man, his freedom and his happiness. He knew very well that the Yugoslav communists were inspired by the French Revolution, so he used the Dubrovnik themes of the Vojnović brothers as a subtle critique of their regime. He deeply believed that from forgetting freedom ensues instant slavery, which is a great legacy of this great man to the country he loved so much, the country of hard-won freedom.

His last words on his deathbed were an expression of the imperishable unity of faith and reason, at the same time his spiritual and intellectual testament which he left me as his pupil. It was as if he wanted to hand me the flag of the struggle for a better Croatian historiography and a higher Croatia, when he told me: “Fight, my dear Stipe, for democratic historiography and high Croatia.” Finally, I reassured him that he should be afraid of nothing, because he was about to meet Christ, to which he replied: “That’s right, my Stipe. God, Jesus and Mary, that is our motto”. In this way our dear and beloved Professor Ivo Banac lived and died, all under the insignia of *Fides et Ratio*. Let the heavenly angels take him to the eternal city of Jerusalem!

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